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ABSTRACT

A description is given of the Critical Needs Certification Program (CNCP), established in 1984 in South Carolina, which trains teachers in content areas experiencing critical teacher shortages. Under its provisions, college graduates with degrees in mathematics, science, library science, or foreign language begin teaching without the normally required education courses or student teaching. Accelerated teacher training is provided for individuals who have strong academic credentials. Because program participants must obtain a teaching position in an appropriate content area before they are trained, CNCP activities occur before, during and after the first year of teaching. Participants go through 2 years of supervised on-the-job training with a preservice 2-week institute. During the first 8 months of teaching, participants also attend monthly seminars where they work with teaching specialists to solve problems encountered on the job. Data is provided on several demographic characteristics of CNCP participants and some conclusions are drawn on the success of the program. (JD)

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Maintaining Academic Integrity in the Midst of Educational Reform: An Alternative Certification Program

by

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Maintaining Academic Integrity in the Midst of Educational Reform: An Alternative Certification Program

Few issues in American education can engender more debate than the "alternative certification" of teachers. The debate centers on whether novices can learn effective teaching skills through non-traditional programs. Many argue that alternative programs are the best hope for meeting the great demand for teachers, especially in areas of critical shortages like mathematics and science. Others contend that in their haste to address these shortages, teacher-training agencies are lowering standards.

In 1986, the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) proposed that alternative certification programs were distinguishable from teacher-training schemes that circumvent professional preparation, such as the "emergency" procedures permitted in some states (AACTE, 1986). If, as AACTE claims, alternative certification programs are different from "emergency" plans, what exactly are they? Oliver and McKibben (1985) argue that any plan which significantly differs from the traditional undergraduate teacher-preparation procedure is an alternative program. This seemingly tautological definition is important in recognizing that as alternative programs have emerged, they have been remarkably dissimilar. Some alternative programs are created to recruit prospective teachers from non-traditional age groupings (Smith et al., 1986). Others are designed to bring greater numbers of arts and science graduates to teaching (Dottin, 1985). Until a thorough examination of all non-traditional programs can be made, it will remain difficult to offer more than tentative definition of the broad class of alternative certification programs.

Nationally, colleges of education, their accrediting agencies, teacher associations, and teachers themselves have been slow to accept the idea of alternative certification. Such reluctance is probably a function of doubt that non-traditional programs can prepare competent instructors for the nation's classrooms. This doubt seems most pronounced in specialty fields which require specific, non-generic skills. Among these fields might be special education or school psychometry. Nonetheless, many professional educators now believe that these objections do not apply to most secondary school subject areas.
In an attempt to establish guidelines by which alternative certification programs might be acceptable, AACTE offers four recommendations. The first of these calls for "admissions standards including a baccalaureate degree and assessment of subject matter competency,

personal characteristics, and communication skills" (AACTE, 1986). Although AACTE does not elaborate the specifics of this or the other three guidelines, it seems certain that they are calling for careful screening to insure the admission of persons with no less than a bachelor's degree in an appropriate subject field, verbal and written communication skills appropriate to classroom teaching and the personality types and patterns of behavior expected of professionals who work with young people. AACTE (1986) also calls for a curriculum that provides the knowledge and skills needed by beginning teachers, a supervised student teaching experience, examination of each participant's knowledge of the relevant subject field, and "professional studies" (Smith et al. 1985). In South Carolina a non-traditional program incorporates all of these suggestions.

Established in 1984, the South Carolina Critical Needs Certification Program (CNCP) trains teachers in content areas experiencing critical teacher shortages. The program is funded under the South Carolina Education Improvement Act. Based on supply and demand figures, the State Board of Education annually designates the content areas to be served by the program. In 1985, the Board designated secondary mathematics and science as critical areas, adding library science in 1986 and foreign language in 1988.

During the 1984-85 academic year, a committee comprised of persons from the public schools, higher education, and the State Department of Education met to design a conditional certification program for teachers. Their design was adopted in May, 1985 and Winthrop College was selected to direct the program. A rigorous curriculum was specified. To date, 204 persons have begun this program. Of that number, 143 teachers have made satisfactory progress. CNCP participants are now teaching in 72 school districts in 43 of the state's 46 counties.

The Critical Needs Certification Program is not modelled on any other design. Under its provisions, college graduates with degrees in mathematics, science, library science, or foreign language begin teaching without the normally required education courses or student teaching practicum. Rather, the CNCP provides accelerated teacher training to individuals who have strong academic credentials. Because program participants must obtain a teaching position in an appropriate content area before they are trained, CNCP activities occur before, during and after the first year of teaching. Participants receive regular teacher salaries while enrolled in the program.

CNCP participants begin two years of supervised on-the-job training with a pre-service two-week institute. (Successfully completing the institute yields three undergraduate credit hours.) During the first eight months of teaching, participants also attend monthly seminars where they work with teaching specialists to solve problems encountered on the job. In addition, they are observed and evaluated in their classrooms by CNCP staff and local mentors who also are trained by the CNCP staff. Those candidates judged to have made satisfactory progress in the CNCP during the first full or partial year of teaching and who have been offered a new teaching contract for the ensuing year, receive additional training in a second two-week institute. Successful completion of the second institute and effective teaching in the home school during the ensuing year results in the award of six graduate hours of credit from Winthrop College. Participants also are required to complete nine hours of prescribed graduate study from any accredited college or university during the three-year conditional certification period.

An individual may enter the program either in the summer (July - August) or in the winter (January). The program's first cycle was initiated with 15 participants (14 completed the program). Since that time, enrollments have averaged approximately sixty participants per cycle. Currently, among the 143 participants, 56 are teaching mathematics, 83 are teaching science, and three are in library science.

Those participating in the program represent a wide array of academic and experiential backgrounds. All participants hold degrees from arts and science programs including thirty-two persons who hold masters degrees and six with Ph.D.s. Prior teaching experiences are similarly varied ranging from recent graduates with little experience to veteran private school teachers and college professors. Other participants have come to the program from careers in various business fields including industrial chemistry, research, engineering, and banking. Several participants are former career military personnel and one person is a recently returned Peace Corps volunteer. The diversity of academic preparation and occupational experience has been a major consideration in the development of the curriculum for this program.

As previously reported, there are 143 active participants. Presented below is data describing several demographic characteristics of CNCP participants.

Gender and Race	(frequency)
Total Current	143
Females	88
Males	55
Minorities	23
Females	18
Males	5
Certification Area and Gender	
Mathematics	56
Females	36
Males	21
Science	83
Females	50
Males	33
Library Science	3
Females	2
Males	1
Age Ranges	
24 - 28	57
29 - 33	33
34 - 38	18
39 - 43	18
44 - 48	10
49 - 53	5
54 - 58	1
59 - 63	1

Previous Employment	
Laboratory Technician	17
Student	17
Military	15
Sales	14
Research Assistant	13

Bank Clerk	10
Clerical Work	10
Teacher (private school, college, university)	9
Bookkeeper	7
Food Service	7
Pharmaceuticals	3
Biologist	2
Chemist	2
Counselor	2
Hospital Administrator	2
Librarian (private sector)	2
Marine Biologist	2
Forestry	1
Nutritionist	1
Optician	1
Peace Corps Volunteer	1
Plant Manager	1
Reporter	1
Sanitation Control	1
Veterinary Technician	1

Educational Background (Highest degree held)

Bachelors	110
Masters	25
Ph.D.	6

CNCP participants teach in a wide range of the state's school districts. Many are in city and suburban school districts, yet a considerable number have chosen to teach in rural areas.

Due to the program's challenging standards, relocation, illness and other factors, approximately 26% of the participants are no longer teaching in South Carolina.

Conclusion

Several conclusions can be drawn from three years experience working with the South Carolina Critical Needs Certification Program. First, this program seems to validate student teaching as the most productive element in traditional teacher-training programs. The South Carolina experience provides persuasive evidence that what is valuable in the student teaching process is less related to its timing within a program of study than to the fact that it presents prospective teachers with realistic classroom experiences. That is, the true value of student teaching may emerge from direct contact with curriculum, policy and students. Whether these experiences take place before or simultaneously with the assumption of classroom teaching duties may be of little consequence. In fact, while some might argue that no person should teach before completing a two-or-three month student teaching experience, others might effectively counter that two years of carefully supervised teaching can be even more effective preparation for teaching. Empirical comparisons of the relative values of these and other approaches to teacher preparation are needed. Professional teacher educators must be committed to doing that which is most effective and to avoiding ideas more strongly rooted in tradition than in logic.

Secondly, the South Carolina program seemed to diminish what might be called an "arts-and-science-attitude" about teacher training. For years arts and sciences majors enrolled in teacher training courses have been skeptical about education's claim to specialized knowledge. Many of the CNCP participants entered the South Carolina program with such an attitude. Nonetheless, as they engaged the body of research central to effective teaching, their doubts dissipated. Anonymous surveys indicated that the overwhelming majority of those successfully completing the South Carolina program acquired genuine respect for both teaching and teacher educators.

Finally, the South Carolina program appears to uphold the belief that teachers can be well trained in less time than is required by most traditional programs. This may lead to the conclusion that the academic preparation of persons being trained as teachers and the quality of their training is far more important than any consideration of time spent in preparation. It may follow then that when skilled teacher educators work with teacher candidates who are well-versed in an academic discipline, emotionally and socially well-adjusted, and eager to learn how to teach, an accelerated curriculum can be effective. Longitudinal studies are needed to determine both how effective such programs are and which screening devices best select teacher candidates capable of learning in an accelerated

setting. Based on its record of success, the South Carolina Critical Needs Certification Program appears to have found a viable mix of curriculum and candidates. Public education in South Carolina is well served by this innovative approach to teacher preparation.

Note:

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